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A catalan plague=tract of
April 24, 1348,
by Jacme d'Agramont

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**A catalan plague-tract of April 24, 1348,
by Jacme d'Agramont (1)**

By Dr. Arnold C. KLEBS, Nyon.

Being occupied some time ago with the bibliographical « mise-au-point » of those writings on the plague which had been printed by the first presses, I noticed, in the *Bibliografia Medical de Catalunya* (Barcelona 1918), the entry of a manuscript, interesting on account of its early date, the earliest in the annals of the Black Death. Outside of Catalonia apparently nobody had noticed it and so I called attention to it in my publication. (2)

My English translation of this tract, I shall publish elsewhere. It contains much that is of interest especially as a cultural historical document of the first half of the « trecento », a period which in this particular corner of the Iberian peninsula did much towards furthering the revival of intellectual pursuits which gradually manifested itself in European Christendom. Keeping through centuries outside of moorish domination it maintained purer the traditions of the early Greek and Roman colonists who had flourished here. In this respect Catalonia resembles much Salerno, that other portal through which classic learning found entrance into Europe.

There seems to be very little known about the author of this tract. Enquiries in Barcelona and Madrid brought nothing. Dr. D'IRSAY who has been working in Spanisch Archives and Libraries this spring, has tried to find out something in Lerida. He kindly reports to me that he went through the notes of the late Arderiu who as librarian at Lerida, had first called the attention of the medical historians to the tract. They contain « practically nothing ». He suggests however that he found a record of the parish priest of Verdù who appears to have obtained the title of Doctor at Lerida in 1342, and that this man may have been our author, JACME D'AGREMONT. There may be something to this, for an original transcript of the tract, was discovered at the parrochial archives of Verdù, where it still is preserved. Verdù lies a little to the south of the main road which joins Lerida to Barcelona and winds its way eastward through the hills of Montserrat and by Manresa where once another child of the land, Ignace of Loyola, formed world-moving plans. Some twenty kilometers north from Verdù is Agramont, presumably the family seat of JACME's family, not far from Villanova de Meyd, one of the many towns of that name which might claim the famous ARNOLDUS (1245-1313) although he is most frequently conceded to Valencia. In the tract JACME calls himself « natural » of Lerida, and at the time of writing he lived there, as Master in Arts and Medicine, « in the last year of his lecture », which speaks for his connection with the Studio of Lerida, known to have been founded in 1300.

(1) Roca Y Heras, Joseph (Barcelona) & Arderiu, E. (Lleyda):

Regiment de preservació o epidimia o pestilencia e mortaldats. — Epistola de Maestre Jacme d'Agramont als honorats e discrets seynnors pahers è Conseyll de la Ciutat de Lleyda. Amb entraments de l'Enrich Arderiu y d'en Joseph Ma. Roca.

Lerida 1910 Joseph A. Pagés. (4° 37 pag. Facs.)

(2) Klebs, A. C. & Droz, E. Remèdes contre la peste. Paris. 1925, p. 60. Tome I des Documents scientifiques du XV^e siècle. Ed. Droz.

In the colophon he tells us that his tract was finished in the Vigils of Saint Mark of 1348, that is the 24th of April.

We do not know the exact date of the plague's arrival at Lerida. JACME says on trustworthy authority that «an epidemic or pestilence and mortality» reigns and has reigned «in certain parts and regions close to ours.» The threatening danger was evidently near at hand in Lerida on April 24th, for we know that the plague had reached Marseilles around Christmas of 1347 via Constantinople (summer 1347), Messina (Oct. 1347), Genoa (Nov. 1347), and from there the Provence and Languedoc, notably Avignon, the papal residence. In Venice and the interior of Italy its reign had reached a considerable extent by April 1348 (Florence, Pisa, Piombino, Lucca Siena, Modena, Bologna and probably Naples). I find no records of the date of its arrival at Lerida, though no doubt they exist. But at any rate Catalonia seems to have been the portal of entrance into Spain. In May it reached Barcelona and Valencia, and on the 24th of that month Majorca is reported. On June 1st IBN AL HATIMAH announces its appearance in Muslim Almeria. The threat to Lerida was therefore imminent.

We can not expect to find in JACME's tract a clinical appreciation of the disease but only a summary of the knowledge which could guide authorities to anticipate the danger. In the literature of the plague it occupies the same position as the famous «Compendium» issued by the medical faculty of Paris at the request of King Philip in October. This most authoritative document, it must be emphasized, was written by men personally unacquainted with the plague. It reached Paris only soon after October 1348, and not in mid-summer, as is still frequently asserted in the literature. The context is clear on this subject. Its derivative character is plainly indicated in the preamble: *clarissimorum philosophorum antiquorum dictis et etiam modernorum sapientium*. JACME's wisdom is modern though it is based on that of his predecessors notably ARISTOTLE, HIPPOCRATES, GALEN, AVICENNA and ALBERTUS MAGNUS but he deals with his subject in a manner which suggests that later writers may have used him, rather than the earlier authors.

Of JACME's practical and theoretical knowledge the tract gives the impression that he was well grounded in both. But on the whole it represents rather «Lesefrüchte» than personal observation. He speaks primarily as a sanitarian, giving advice as to prevention, leaving aside purposeley the physician. Of superstition, of an inordinate tendency of assigning the unscrutable to supernatural influences there is remarkably little evidence in his work. He mentions of course the belief that some plagues are sent as divine punishment for human sin, and that for them there is no remedy, he cites biblical passages in support of this at some length, he is convinced that astral phenomena play a rôle in the etiology of epidemics. These are methods of approach to truth which we do not utilize anymore chiefly because they do not lend themselves to laboratory investigation.

The question as to what features characterize a pestilence receives from JACME the current answer. The clinical aspect of its victims is outlined without insistence on differentiation, pestilence does not represent a pathological entity, it is not called pneumonic or bubonic plague. These criteria, to us of fundamental importance, are noted by him almost parenthetically, the most impressive feature to him, as to his contemporaries, being its epidemical character, it's falling not only upon single individuals, but upon the entire population of the land with unusual malignancy. He speaks not of the «black»

(1) A co-member of the Société française d'histoire de médecine, Dr. SALVADOR VIVES formerly of Gerona now in Barcelona, most kindly procured for me the transcription of d'Agramont's tract. Nothing in it indicates who made the transcription but I take it to be the same as the one cited in the Bibliografia, established by Roca and Arderiù. The original is the Ms. at Verdù which has the note: *Factum ccclxxxvii*, thereby indicating it as a copy of an earlier ms. in 1387. It is written in a fine, legible hand of the time, on a folio page in two columns (each col. measuring 75 by 215 mm.). Leaves 1 and 10 recto are given in facsimile here, leaf 5 recto in the Bibl. med. Catalunya.

death, this name coming into use only after certain clinical features impressed the observer. The terrific killing power of the plague must have been common knowledge, for the insistence on its unusual violence such as had never been observed before, appears already in JACME's tract. Subsequently these reports were found only too true, and we, 580 years later, know that no plague in our era can be compared with it, except the so-called Justinian plague in the sixth century, 800 years before.

While JACME's attention to the distempered cosmic factors, to meteorological disturbances, his relative neglect of contagion and transmission by persons and fomites does not allow us to place him among the forerunners of modern doctrine, his insistence on the viciousness of insanitary conditions in private and public life is loud and to the point. Thus after dwelling on Lerida's site and its climatic advantages, comparing it to unfavorable sites such as Tortosa which is shaded from the morning sun and has a swampy neighborhood similar to that of Oristayn in Sardinia, he says that if nonetheless the town is frequently invaded by sickness this is, not due « to bad air but to bad management. » And he goes on to note some of these defects. The worst is that Lerida stores great quantities of foodstuffs, being in the centre of an agricultural district. Such places to him seem always more apt to become insanitary than others, because of the liability of decay in these foodstuffs. He insists that specifically certain local nuisances are abolished : « Entrails and refuse, dead beasts must not be thrown on the public grounds. Manure heaps must be banished. Neither in day or night must excrements be deposited in the public dump, nor should in or near the town be skins tanned, nor should cattle and other beasts be butchered near human habitations. » To this he adds without transparent reason : « This precaution is valid for Paris, Avignon and Lerida. » As the most insanitary quarter of Lerida he notes the bridge-head. He does not specify the reason, but it may be presumed that he has in mind local moisture and decaying refuse. « Humidity is the mother of putrefaction », heat being the father. Probably the tripe shop (*triperia*), the convents of the Minorite Brothers and that of the Predicants signalled by him as particularly unhealthy, were situated in this district. He also objects to anything which hinders the proper ventilation — he distinguishes this from aëration and illustrates it by the effect on cloth put out to dry, one preventing decay the other discoloration — such as obtains in some places, as Seo de Urgell, surrounded by mountains, but in Lerida because of too many obstructing trees. He objects particularly to walnut and fig trees. He urges that the chestnuts around the fountain be cut down. Dirt in houses expose them more than others, shut-in habitations which cannot be aired are pernicious. When plague has broken out in a house usually all the inmates get it. The servants get it from the masters, and it spreads to the physician and confessor.

JACME recognizes the following communicable maladies : leprosy (*le-brosita*), scabies (*mesleria e roynna*), phthisis, running eyes (*lagaynna*), small-pox (*pigota*), measles (*sasarampio*), mange (*tyinna*), plague fever and in general all maladies that come from pestilential air.

Here the problem as to what is health what disease troubles him. He cites ARISTOTLE (7th book de *problematibus*). The patients blood undergoes an alteration when he goes from health to disease. Why doesn't the blood undergo also an alteration when the patient recovers ? The reply is : Malady is change, health is repose (we might say disease is lability, health stability). Hence malady moves while health does not move. A little troubled by this scholastic subtilty he notes : We perceive that the reply though true is not clearly understandable by everybody, and one might say that health is temperament and sickness distemperament. And the distempered thing being of a higher degree of quality than the tempered, provokes more violent effects and alteration.

That insanitary conditions predispose the individual as well as certain localities to the plague he well understands and he enumerates in addition constitutional factors of those predisposed and receptive. Wide open porosities are here given the well known prominence.

That JACME should enter into the minutiae of personal hygiene is self-evident. The famous Regimen Sanitatis of Salerno as commented upon by that other Catalan ARNOLDUS DE VILLANOVA, the Aristotle letter, the Regime du Corps which ALDOBRANDIN DE SIENA provided for the Countess of Provence for her visit to her four queen-daughters written in 1256 were like the troubadour's chansons de geste of the time and in this land, part and parcel of every educated man, and what our JACME has to say on this subject is but an adaptation of this primer of common health-sense to his particular subject. En passant we may note that most of these older health regimen contained special rules against pestilence.

In conclusion it might be said that all the authors of the flood of Pest-schriften which SUDHOFF has been at great pains for many years to bring into the daylight, a labor for which medical historians can never thank him adequately, have repeated and for more than two hundred years of a further epoch repeated again a great deal of what JACME told the city fathers of Lerida when the Black Death knocked at Europe's doors. We have had no plague in Europe since 1720. But are we really much wiser? Before me lies the latest Pestschrift. The League of Nations published it last year. It is by a Chinese physician and scholar WU-LIEN-TEH. I have gone through its 500 and odd pages and I tremble in fear that if some heavenly conjunction or something else would favor a new outbreak such as JACME witnessed, we might find some of our approved methods not to work as well as on paper. My thoughts go back to 1918-19 when the influenza invaded us in America and I witnessed the inefficacy of more rules and regulations than could ever have entered the brain of a medieval physician, masks being worn against the pestilential air, the rich fleeing to distant hills, schools closed, theatres closed, assemblies prohibited, writers terrorizing the readers of popular magazines with pseudo-scientific nonsense and superstition. And when now I look at the historical introduction to the latest Pestschrift, I find it is nothing but a deferential bow to a new fangled fashion and second and third hand sources are considered sufficient for a pleasant curtain raiser. No, gentlemen of the League, that will not do, though your intention is praiseworthy. I believe we will make no head way in pragmatic epidemiology unless we study carefully, not only the dates and men and places in the history of epidemics, but the catastrophe as a whole. Perhaps historical research may prove its greatest practical value in epidemiology.

Discussion : SUDHOFF, JOHNSSON, SIGERIST, D'IRSAY, WELCH.

SUDHOFF meint dass doch wohl der eine der Pestdiskurse von GENTILE DA FOLIGNO, in dem er von der Pest in Genua handelt, vor die Pestschrift des JACME D'AGREMONT zu setzen ist. Was zuerst über die Pest erschien ist allenthalben im wesentlichen scholastische Tradition, ohne eigene Beurteilung und Beobachtung. Auch das Pariser «Compendium» von Oktober 1348 ist trotz seiner Eingangsworte «visis effectibus» rein traditionell Ueberliefertes. Kurz nachher sind im Niederdeutschen bzw. um die Rheinmündung kurze Exkurse eigener Beobachtung überliefert. Bis zum Jahr 1400 folgt eigenes mehr oder weniger Originelles, dann erlischt der Elan völlig und die literarische Welle plätschert weiter im ausgetretenen Bette.

